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ABSTRACT

Parental involvement in the educational process is examined as one of the elements that can raise academic achievement and allow schools to achieve success. The benefits of parental involvement are outlined, from those to students, such as improved academic performance, greater student motivation, and lower dropout rates, through those to parents themselves, such as a greater sense of adequacy and self-worth, and the schools which receive a community perspective. Levels of parental involvement are considered at major levels that include the basic obligations of parents and schools, parental involvement at school and in learning activities, and parental involvement in governance and advocacy. Sometimes added to this typology are family support programs that are a developmental service for parents. Implementing and maintaining parental involvement programs requires: (1) staff consultation; (2) acknowledgment of family types; (3) recognition of the needs of single parent families; (4) acceptance of culturally diverse families; (5) assessment of community characteristics; (6) parent recruitment; (7) collaboration and communication; (8) establishing multiple entry points; and (9) program maintenance. (Contains 37 references.) (SLD)

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ED 382 759

A Companion Document to An Education of Value for At Risk Students: Possibilities for Practice

Parents and Schools: Partners in Education

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Student Support Branch
Manitoba Education and Training

1994

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Introduction

A substantial body of research on family involvement in the educational process supports the critical role that parents play in raising their children's educational accomplishments. Parents are more significant than either teachers or peers in influencing educational aspirations for the majority of children (Greenberg, 1989; Bloom, 1985; Albert and Runco, 1985; Porter, Porter and Blishen, 1982). They provide insights and knowledge that complement the professional skills of educators in ways that strengthen school programs (Comer and Haynes, 1991). Multiple lines of evidence indicate that parental involvement in the educational process is of primary importance in the optimal cognitive, social, and emotional development of children.

Effective parental involvement, especially of "difficult-to-reach," "high-risk," or "disadvantaged parents," is one of the most challenging educational practices to implement and sustain successfully. Simply expressing general support for parental involvement or adopting a policy of "good intentions" is unlikely to produce significant results (Davies, 1985). Programs take time to develop. They require building trust among parents coupled with administrative commitment and support.

Division and school administrators need to recognize the potential to remove structural barriers to parental involvement programs, allocate resources, and train and designate staff to implement programs. Parental involvement programs that are implemented in traditional bureaucratic and rigid school structures are less likely to yield positive results than those that are a part of a more collaborative environment (Comer and Haynes, 1991).

A number of social, economic, and cultural factors have re-shaped the structure and nature of family life in Canadian society. They have placed pressures on children and youth, their families and the institutions that serve them. Traditional practices of involving parents in the educational process are insufficient to deal with the current situation. Parents' work obligations, lifestyles, cultural backgrounds, values, needs, interests, and strengths need to be accommodated in school expectations of their participation.

When meaningful and effective programs are instituted, students, parents, schools, and the community receive significant benefits. They include

- improved academic performance
- improved student behaviour
- greater student motivation
- lower rates of early school leaving
- enhanced parental self-worth and self-confidence
- more effective academic and social programs
- improved working environments for educators
- strengthened social networks

The benefits of parental involvement are not confined to early childhood or the early or middle years of school. A number of studies confirm the value of parental participation in the senior years. At this level, however, the nature of involvement is often different. Parents, for example, can serve as mentors to assist groups of students with transitional problems (Liontos, 1992).

Children from low-income families appear to have the most to gain when schools involve parents (Cochran and Dean, 1991; Kagan, 1989; Hobbs, 1984). A recurring misconception is that less educated or disadvantaged parents place a limited value on education and fail to take an active part in their children's schooling.

A number of studies, however, suggest that the opposite is the case (Ziegler, Harwick and Mcreath, 1989; Auerbach, 1985). Poor, minority, and immigrant families value education. What they lack, however, is a sense of control over their children's experiences and successes. They feel powerless or unable to promote and encourage their children's education. As a result, they are somewhat removed from their children's school and schooling (Ziegler, Harwick and McCreath, 1989).

The attitudes, practices, and strategies that schools adopt to help disadvantaged or less-educated parents become involved are also key variables for understanding whether or how parents become informed and successful partners in their children's education (Epstein and Dauber, 1991). Evidence suggests that most parents,

regardless of race, ethnic background, and marital status, or educational and socio-economic levels, respond when schools reach out in positive, non-threatening, and non-manipulative ways (Comer and Haynes, 1991; Gordon, 1976).

Involving parents in the educational process has never been a new strategy. Parents have always played a key role in their children's education, but over time the nature of that involvement has changed (Hepworth-Berger, 1991). Traditional forms of parental involvement have often favoured middle-class families and excluded low-income or minority language families (Liontos, 1992; Auerbach, 1985). School improvement council activities include meetings, setting agendas, studies, and reports which are activities that are familiar to well-educated, middle-class individuals (Davis, 1985). In addition, assisting children at home with school work is easier for middle class parents who are confident and comfortable with academic assignments. Consequently, middle-class parents are most often and effectively involved in the educational process. If this participation, as the evidence suggests, has positive effects on their children's learning, then the achievement gap between middle-class children and the children of the poor will increase if schools continue with only traditional forms of parental involvement (Davies, 1985).

Schools may reach out to "high risk," "disadvantaged" or "difficult-to reach" families by

- using sensitive and adequately prepared school representatives conducting home visits
- holding some meetings outside of the school in less formal, potentially intimidating settings
- accommodating parents whose English proficiency is weak

The initiative to involve parents who are from disadvantaged, minority, and immigrant groups must come from the school. A diverse and persistent approach is needed to eliminate barriers and establish trust. That helps to decrease the social distance between schools and families. In addition, the reputation of the school as a "caring and enabling place" spreads in the community and generates greater involvement (Comer and Haynes, 1991).

Parental involvement in the educational process is not a solution to all the problems that schools encounter. The following factors are needed to raise educational accomplishments of students and allow schools to achieve success. They are

- meaningful parent involvement programs integrated with an innovative and stimulating curricula
- effective instructional practices and appropriate assessment procedures
- a positive and supportive learning environment
- enhanced opportunities for staff development
- community involvement

The purpose of this paper is to examine parental involvement in the educational process. In the following section, the benefits of parental involvement for students, parents, and schools are outlined. The third section reviews the various levels of parental involvement that require different resources and processes and may lead to different outcomes. The fourth section presents a number of factors that administrators and educators need to consider when implementing and sustaining successful parent involvement programs. Special consideration is given to accommodating "high risk," "disadvantaged," or "difficult-to-reach" families.

The Benefits of Parental Involvement

A number of studies have examined the effects of involving parents in the education of their children. The overall evidence indicates that meaningful parental involvement programs have significant benefits for students, parents, schools, and the community.

Benefits for Students

The benefits of parental involvement programs for students include improved academic performance, improved student behaviour, greater student motivation, more regular attendance, lower student dropout rates, and a more positive attitude toward homework and school (Liontos, 1992; Epstein and Dauber, 1991; Hart, 1988). Liontos (1992) and Davies (1989) suggest that when parents help children at home in a particular subject, the student's level of achievement is likely to increase. In their efforts to learn, the children of parents who participate in school activities are better behaved and more diligent. Teachers and principals, who know parents by virtue of their participation in school activities, treat the parents with greater respect. In addition, teachers and principals are more positive toward the children of involved parents (Lyons, Robbins and Smith, 1983).

Henderson (1988) indicates that parents, regardless of social class or income, promote the development of attitudes that are key to student achievement when they show an interest in their children's schooling. Even if parents lack the academic background to help with homework, students respond with heightened interest and greater achievement if parents show an active interest in their work. Greenberg (1988) suggests that parental endorsement of school seems to affect children's self-esteem, self-discipline, mental health, and long-term aspirations.

Children from low-income and less educated families appear to have the most to gain when schools involve parents in meaningful ways.

Children from low-income and less educated families appear to have the most to gain when schools involve parents in meaningful ways (Liontos, 1992; Cochran and Dean, 1991; Comer and Haynes, 1991; Hobbs, 1984). An important cause of the high incidence of academic failure is the fact that the preparation of learning that many students receive at home is inadequate or fundamentally different from what schools expect (Liontos, 1992).

Through their work, Comer and Haynes (1991) found that the only difference between low-income and middle-income students is that the latter developed skills needed to succeed in school simply by growing up with better educated parents. Consequently, they developed a program called the *Social Skills Curriculum for Inner City Children* which gave low-income students similar experiences to those that middle-income students gained at home.

Parents and staff in this program received the training to develop a program that gave students experiences in four areas

- politics and government
- business and economics
- health and nutrition
- spiritual and leisure time

The curriculum integrated the teaching of academic skills with the teaching of social skills and appreciation of the arts. Units were carried out during elective time without taking time from teaching the standard academic programs.

The benefits of parental involvement for students are not restricted to early childhood or the early or middle years of school. There are also benefits for involving parents continually throughout the senior years.

The benefits of parental involvement for students are not restricted to early childhood or the early or middle years of school. There are also benefits for involving parents continually throughout the senior years. A number of studies confirm the value of parental involvement at the high school level and suggest that early school leaving may be prevented by supportive parents. Some early school leavers indicated that lack of parental support, more specifically "apathetic parents," contributed to their decision to withdraw from school (Employment and Immigration Canada and Statistics Canada, 1990).

Benefits for Parents

Liontos (1992) reports that parents often gain a greater sense of adequacy, self-worth, and self-confidence when involved with their children's education. Parents receive ideas from teachers or project coordinators on how to help their children. They also gain knowledge of child development, and greater understanding of the importance of the home as an environment for learning. Epstein and Dauber (1991) suggest that when schools make parental

involvement part of the program, parents increase their interactions with their children at home, are more positive about their ability to help their children in the elementary grades, and give better overall ratings to teachers.

Apart from motivating parents, these programs may also give them the opportunity to resume their own education. This involvement, in turn, emphasizes the importance of education to their children. Participation may also lead to

- strengthened social networks
- expanded community involvement
- increased parental feelings of competence
- increased motivation to participate in the political process
- greater feelings of control over their environment

Parental rapport with the school is more positive when they become involved in their children's instruction. This participation provides parents with a greater understanding of the teacher's job and school programs. Involving parents directly in school operations lessens parental distrust of educators.

Findings from the *Family Matters* project, developed at Cornell University, indicate that parental perceptions of themselves as parents were increased and their social networks grew more than a comparison group. This became especially evident if they were single parents (Cochran and Dean, 1991). A positive outcome from the parental involvement component of the *Follow Through* program was the increased use of advocacy skills by parents who practiced and improved their abilities to become advocates for their children, the program, and the school (Olmstead, 1991).

Parental rapport with the school is more positive when they become involved in their children's instruction (Hart, 1988). This participation provides parents with a greater understanding of the teacher's job and school programs. Involving parents directly in school operations lessens parental distrust of educators (Liontos, 1992). As a result, when parents and schools develop a strong, positive relationship, they are able to work together to encourage desirable academic and social performances among students.

Benefits for Schools

Parents are a natural link between communities and schools. This is particularly important when teachers and other school staff live outside of the neighbourhood where they work. Parents bring a community perspective to planning and governance (Comer and

Haynes, 1991). They also bring an understanding of the needs, talents, and experiences of their own children that can help teachers plan age- and culturally-appropriate school programs. In this sense, parental insights and knowledge can complement the professional skills of a school's staff in ways that strengthen academic and social programs (Comer and Haynes, 1991). The working lives of school personnel are also made more productive and rewarding (Liontos, 1992).

Hunter (1989) suggests that volunteer parents can augment the work of teachers by first receiving training and then assuming responsibilities that range from clerical work to tasks involving direct assistance to students' learning. Volunteer parents can act as mentors. In the classroom, they can enrich and extend the curriculum by sharing their expertise and enthusiasm about hobbies, interests, and cultural knowledge. To be effective volunteers, however, parents require clear direction from the schools. Schools can also access and make use of parental networks to communicate with and recruit other parents into programs.

Levels of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement occurs at various levels of school life, from general support of education and involvement in learning activities at home to direct participation in the activities, planning, and management in schools. Within each of these levels of involvement, administrators and educators can institute a variety of programs.

There are at least five major levels of parent involvement in the educational process (Epstein, 1988). They occur in different places, require different resources and processes, and may lead to different outcomes. They include

- the basic obligations of parents
- the basic obligations of schools
- parental involvement at school
- parental involvement in learning activities
- parental involvement in governance and advocacy

Another level that is occasionally added to this five part typology are family support programs. Administrators and educators need to be familiar with the different levels of parental involvement as each level is important in its own way for its contribution to educational outcomes.

Basic Obligations of Parents

The basic obligations of parents refers to responsibilities to

- ensure their children's health and safety
- carry out parenting and child-rearing skills needed to prepare children for school
- supervise, discipline, and guide children continually at each age level

This level of involvement also entails parental commitment to the necessity of schooling for their children and an understanding of the influence that this commitment has on a student's own commitment to participating positively in school.

A number of cultural, social, and economic factors, however, have left many families stressed and isolated, making it more difficult for

them to perform many "natural" child care and education functions and fulfil many basic obligations. As a result, many family support programs have been developed to assist parents at this level of involvement.

Basic Obligations of Schools

The basic obligations of schools refers to communication from school to parents about school programs and their children's progress. Schools vary in the form and frequency of communications such as memos, notices, report cards, and conferences. They have considerable influence whether the information about school programs and their children's progress is understood by all parents.

Two basic formal ways to achieve face-to-face contact are

- home visits
- parent-teacher conferences

Parent-teacher conferences, however, are held infrequently and are difficult to schedule. Home visits are particularly effective with "high risk" or "hard-to-reach" families (Liontos, 1992), but may cause anxiety for both staff and parents. They also require sensitive and adequately prepared school representatives. Some schools send videotapes of workshops, meetings, or other activities of interest to parents who, for various reasons, are unable attend school events.

Parental Involvement At School

Parental involvement at school refers to parent volunteers who assist teachers and administrators and children in classrooms or other areas of the school. It also refers to parents who come to schools to support student performances, sports, other workshops or other programs for their own education and training.

Parents who volunteer or who come to school events help further communication between parents and teachers. Volunteering or attending school-related functions reinforces the importance of education to their children (Hunter, 1989).

Parental Involvement In Learning Activities

Parental involvement in learning activities at home refers to parent-initiated activities or parent-initiated requests for help and ideas for instruction to monitor and assist their children at home on learning activities that are coordinated with their classwork. Liontos (1992) suggests that for "high risk" or "disadvantaged" parents, the educator's goal is to make such activities non-threatening and meaningful, so that parents will want to participate.

Parental Involvement In Governance

Parental involvement in governance and advocacy refers to parents taking on decision making roles in advisory councils or other committees at the school or divisional level. Also, in this category, are parents and community activists in independent advocacy groups that monitor the schools and work for improvement.

In this form of involvement, parents take on decision making roles related to planning and policy development in school-related matters such as budgets, curriculum, and personnel. Governance practices vary widely in the degree of power that parents have from an advisory role to full responsibility for decision making.

Governance is perhaps the most sensitive level of parental involvement. Many schools and individual teachers are apprehensive and resistant when parental involvement is defined to include personnel, curricular, and budget matters (Cochran and Dean, 1991). It is sometimes difficult to get parents involved at this level because many work during the school day when meetings might take place. This problem was solved in one school participating in the *School Development Program* (Comer and Haynes, 1991) when the principal contacted employers, explained the significance of parental involvement, and requested that parents be given time off to attend such meetings. Employers agreed to the request. In other schools, participating in the project, teachers scheduled team meetings before or after school or in the evenings.

Family Support Programs

Family support programs are seen as a developmental service for all parents (Powell, 1991; Kagan, 1989). They recognize that, even though families of all economic levels share such common concerns as drug abuse or aggressive behaviour, not all families need precisely

the same support at the same time. Consequently, family support programs need to be individualized, adaptive, and flexible. In addition, they must respect parental values and schedules and encourage input in planning.

Family support programs typically promote child development by enhancing child rearing and by drawing upon community resources. The programs usually provide information and guidance, help with securing services, emotional and social support, and services such as job training, early childhood and development education, respite, child care, transportation, health or developmental screening, employment referral, and adult education. Family support programs emphasize prevention and often incorporate paraprofessionals, volunteers, and information networks (Liontos, 1992).

The most effective parent education programs are planned cooperatively by parents and school staff members.

Parent education is perhaps the most common and dominant component of family support programs (Powell, 1991; Kagan, 1989). Parent education involves the enhancement of parental confidence and competence in all areas that effect the family (Hobbs, 1984). Programs provide parents with the knowledge and skills relevant to child development and fostering interaction with other institutions that serve the family. The most effective parent education programs are planned cooperatively by parents and school staff members.

Liontos (1992) suggests that parenting programs should be based on both children's and parents' development. Two-way communication, that is, communication from home to school as well as school to home is also important.

A brief parent training program is recommended by Walker and Sylwester (1991) that focuses on five basic parenting practices to teach parents to

- monitor closely a child's whereabouts, activities, and friends
- participate actively in a child's life
- use positive techniques such as encouragement, praise, and approval to manage a child's home behaviour
- ensure discipline is fair, timely, and appropriate to the offense
- use effective conflict-resolution, problem-solving strategies

Programs that involve parents in cooperative, collaborative activities that respect parental responsible roles in the home, school, and community have been successful in involving parents and promoting students' development.

Powell (1991) indicates that parents who lack a sense of efficacy and personal control, who perceive professionals as insensitive and demanding, and who value privacy and avoid communication, may be difficult to involve in parent education programs. However, programs that involve parents in cooperative, collaborative activities that respect parental responsible roles in the home, school, and community have been successful in involving parents and promoting students' development (Schaefer, 1991; Comer, 1988).

Multi-Level Programming

Some parental involvement programs attempt to include parents at a variety of levels of school life. *The School Development Program* (Comer and Haynes, 1991), for example, involved parents through general support of the school's educational programs, in active participation in daily activities, and in school planning and governance. Parents sponsored or supported school programs and helped in the classrooms. Parents, elected by the parent group, worked together with school personnel to establish academic and social goals and to develop and implement comprehensive school plans. Parents, however, did not supersede the authority of principals and their staffs. Rather, they provided perspectives on issues that served the best interests of students.

The literature on parental involvement indicates that more parents are likely to participate if they are given the opportunity to choose among several activities compatible with their needs, strengths, and interests (Liontos, 1991; Olmstead, 1991; Helleen, 1988).

Implementing and Maintaining Parental Involvement Programs

Effective parental involvement is one of the most challenging educational practices to implement and sustain successfully. The school environment or structure, for example, may inhibit program development. Lack of administrative commitment and support, inadequate training, teachers' contract provisions and building-use decisions by school boards may reduce the likelihood of successful parental involvement practices.

In addition to school barriers, parents may be reluctant to participate if they have had negative school experiences and as a result would feel uncomfortable coming to school (Olmstead, 1991). Other obstacles include

- feelings of inadequacy (not knowing what to do for their child)
- limited English proficiency
- lack of transportation

Some parents may feel that they are not responsible for being involved in the child's education once school has started. Family discord, various types of stress, and logistical problems such as time constraints, scheduling, and child care are other barriers (Liontos, 1992).

Administrators and educators need to consider a number of factors if schools are to develop, implement, and maintain effective parental involvement programs.

Staff Consultation

School staff need to be consulted prior to developing parental involvement programs. Administrators and educators have a wide range of attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, and feelings about parental involvement. It is important to invite school personnel to discuss aspirations and concerns about a parent involvement program. Potential obstacles and possible ways to overcome barriers should also be discussed.

One potential obstacle is confusion about the role of parents. Liontos (1992) suggests that teachers seem to view parental roles as traditional and minimally supportive. Other potential obstructions include concerns over turf and low teacher expectations for at risk

students. Parent apathy is a recurring theme. Many teachers express doubts about whether some parents are capable of helping their children (Epstein and Dauber, 1991). Teachers have expressed concerns about working-class parents, non-English speaking, and immigrant parents (Liontos, 1992).

The consultation process is a necessary first step for developing an enabling and supportive school environment. It allows school personnel to explore concerns, to consider the importance of good home-school relations, and to discuss their concerns with their colleagues.

The consultation process, then, is a necessary first step for developing an enabling and supportive school environment. It allows school personnel to explore concerns, to consider the importance of good home-school relations, and to discuss their concerns with their colleagues. The following questions help to focus the consultation process (Cochran and Dean, 1991; Comer and Haynes, 1991)

- How does each staff member define parental involvement?
- What examples of parental involvement can be found in the school or in other schools in the division?
- What is the comfort level of each staff member with the various levels of parental involvement?
- What type of programs would be most appropriate given the needs and strengths of parents and students?
- What barriers exist within the school that would work against instituting a parental involvement program?
- Who else, locally and regionally, has an interest in increasing parents' role in the school? How could they assist?
- What type of training and resources are required for staff and parents to fulfil the roles and goals of the program?

Comer and Haynes (1991) add that a staff needs broad agreement on involvement before parents are invited into the school.

Simply expressing general support for parental involvement or adopting a policy of "good intentions" is unlikely to produce significant results. Commitment in the form of written policies, administrative support, and training is also required.

Davies (1988) indicates that simply expressing general support for parental involvement or adopting a policy of "good intentions" is unlikely to produce significant results. Commitment in the form of written policies, administrative support, and training is also required (Williams and Chavkin, 1989).

Written policies supported by senior administrators help to legitimize the importance of parental involvement and frame the context for program activities. This approach enables staff and

parents to better understand how parents are to participate in the program.

Administrative support can be provided in three ways by

- designating funds in the main budget for implementing programs
- making available program resources, meeting space, communication equipment, computers, duplication/media equipment to complement specific program activities
- designating staff to carry out program activities or events

Staff training also needs to be made available as information about family types and processes, parental roles in education, and effective working relationships with parents. It is not, however, a component of most preservice teacher training programs. Training also allows colleagues to work together and "brainstorm" with administrators (Cochran and Dean, 1991).

In an in-service for the *Family Matters* project, teachers learned how to empathize with parents, recognize their strengths, make the most of parent-teacher conferences, and find creative ways to involve parents in school activities. Teachers also gained a variety of communication skills by learning to use non-threatening approaches to engage parents actively as resources for the education of their children, and to talk effectively with distraught parents. At the same time, classroom teachers received special attention to enable them to appreciate their strengths and abilities to work together cooperatively (Cochran and Dean, 1991).

Evaluations of the project indicated that workshops had helped some teachers understand and appreciate how the home and community environments influenced the lives of their students. Some teachers also gained a greater appreciation for differences in teaching styles among colleagues. Teachers increased ways of involving parents in school-related activities. They also acknowledged the support by school principals and superintendents to make the program possible. Some teachers explained how effective communication and interpersonal skills gave them an understanding of defensive behaviours, and the ability to deal with frustrated parents. Teachers expressed less concern about

controlling parental involvement and more interest in understanding parental views and needs (Cochran and Dean, 1991).

Liontos (1992) suggests that little has been written about effective ways to train teachers to involve parents in the education process. In one of the few articles, Solomon (1991) suggests that "state-of-the-art" in-service training for classroom teachers include topics on

- ways of providing information and advice to parents in writing, by telephone, during home visits, at parent-teacher conferences and workshops
- methods of helping parents encourage their children's progress in each school goal and subject
- ways parents can help children make successful transitions across school levels
- techniques for helping families prepare their children for taking tests

Family Types

A number of cultural, social, and economic forces have reshaped family structure and the nature of family life in Canadian society. The pressures and incentives toward employment outside the home have increased the entry of women into the labour force. There has also been a large increase in the number of children living in single-parent families, mostly headed by women. Increases in teenage pregnancies have resulted in an ever larger population of youth who need financial, social, and educational support in raising their children.

The structural transformation of the family along with a variety of economic, social, and cultural changes have left many families stressed and isolated, making it more difficult for them to perform "natural" child care and educational functions (Eitzen, 1992; Hobbs, 1984) and provide optimal child-rearing environments (Powell, 1991). Eitzen (1991) suggests that they have also contributed to lessening of family influence on children as parents have less and less time for them. These socio-cultural changes have placed pressures on students, their families, and the institutions that serve them.

Schools cannot develop and institute parent involvement programs based on an idealized image of the nuclear family. Contemporary families are characterized by single-parent households, cultural diversity, and ethnic minority status, dual wage earners, reconstituted or blended families (Powell, 1991). Each of these families has special needs and concerns, and a range of resourcefulness for optimal child-rearing. During program development, parents' work obligations, lifestyles, cultural backgrounds, values and interests, needs and strengths should be considered.

Two family types of particular concern to schools are single parent and culturally diverse families.

Single-Parent Families

Research suggests that single parents find it difficult to participate in their children's education to the full extent they want because schools have not been sensitive to their time constraints and concerns (Liontos, 1992). Complaints include schools often schedule events as though each family had two parents, only one of whom works and that school staff have negative or low expectations of single parents and their children (Powell, 1991). As some parents may not have transportation, schools need to be more flexible in arranging events, scheduling them at times to accommodate working single parents. Transportation should also be arranged so that single parent families can participate in all school activities.

Culturally-Diverse Families

School staff need to learn about cultural differences in attitudes, styles, and practices related to education and the school to avoid practices and events that alienate culturally-different parents (Liontos, 1992; Auerbach, 1989). Additional attempts are needed to develop effective communication lines with non-English speaking families (in Anglophone communities). To achieve this goal, Auerbach (1989) suggests that schools should

- provide translators for those parents who don't speak English
- prepare all information and messages sent home in the parents' native languages
- recruit volunteers to promote communication to parents who don't speak English

- offer English as a Second Language classes or family literacy programs
- develop a plan to help families of bilingual/bicultural students
- understand the role they can play in the educational process, at school and at home
- share information about issues of concern to them

Community Assessment

When dealing with individual families, it is risky to assume that a particular family type such as a single-parent family, is associated with specific family functioning, such as the amount of time spent with a child on homework. Even studies that report differences of involvement based on social status, indicate that it is important to recognize that family practices vary within any group of parents (Epstein and Dauber, 1991). To develop appropriate programs, in addition to socio-demographic data, schools need to collect data on the characteristics, aspirations, needs, and strengths of families. The following questions provide focus for a school's data-gathering efforts.

- What are the special interests, needs, concerns and strengths of parents in the community? What are they interested in doing?
- Are the levels and types of parental involvement programs under consideration compatible with the needs, interests, concerns, and strengths of the families in the community?
- What high-risk or socially-isolated families are within the school catchment area? What obstacles might prevent families from participating in programs?
- To what organizations do families in the community belong?
- Who and where are their spokespersons and leaders?

Parent Recruitment

One policy tension that schools often experience when developing a parental involvement program is recruitment, more specifically, whether the program should be made available on a universal basis or be aimed at a specific population (Powell, 1991). Decisions about universal versus targeted programs involve a trade-off between equity and stigma because a major problem with universal programs is that they may not reach disadvantaged families unless special provisions are made. One possible route out of this dilemma

suggested by Powell (1991) is to require universal programs in communities that are considered to be disadvantaged and underserved. This, he adds, can be an expensive proposition and one that requires close monitoring.

Extensive trust-building through informal parent and community networks are required before parents feel comfortable entering the school.

There are a number of ways schools can reach out to parents. Schools can assign a recruiter, a "project coordinator" or "home-school liaison coordinator." In some communities extensive trust-building through informal parent and community networks are required before parents feel comfortable entering the school (Cochran and Dean, 1991; Olmstead, 1991).

If a goal of parental involvement programs is to include all parents, it is necessary to contact parents who are unresponsive to invitations or messages from the school. Videotapes of workshops, meetings and other events of interest to parents have been sent out to parents who, for various reasons, did not attend school events. Home visits by school representatives, who are adequately prepared and sensitive to barriers of culture, class or language, have been identified as a particularly effective means to reach families who are unresponsive to school invitations (Epstein and Dauber, 1991; Liontos, 1992; Davies, 1985).

Home visits may cause anxiety for both parents and school personnel. Most parents have little experience with school personnel coming to their homes and are uncertain about what to expect. Many school personnel have no training or experience in making home visits and are often apprehensive about how they will be received. Nevertheless, home visits have significant benefits for the school and parents (Liontos, 1992). For schools, home visits allow school representatives to

- gain insights into parent/child relationships
- obtain specific information about the student
- observe situations that might forecast potential changes or account for problems that have already occurred
- provide information and support to parents
- learn more about the home environment and how the school and personnel are perceived by the family

Home visits allow parents to

- meet on a more relaxed basis and communicate in the security and comfort of their own home
- have the opportunity to ask questions of the school representative
- ask how to help the student at home
- learn more about the school system

Home visitors in the *Family Matters* project asked parents to identify activities already being done with their children that parents believed were especially important for the child's development. Activities were written down, verified with parents for accuracy, then, with parental permission, shared with other parents. Cochran and Dean (1991) propose that this approach provided parents with a feeling of self-worth. Home visitors also listened to the parents and provided informal counselling and referral. Emphasis is placed on helping parents value their importance in the lives of their children.

Other topics that may be explored in home visits include important events in the family's current life and information about upcoming meetings and services available from the school and in the community. Sponsors of some parental involvement programs have found that successful home visits may be made by other parents in the program (Olmstead, 1991).

Collaboration and Communication

Collaboration is the essence of effective programs (Davis, 1989; Williams and Chauvkin, 1989; Sealy, 1986; Seaver and Cartwright, 1986). This emphasis is reflected in such activities as joint planning, goal setting, definition of roles, and program assessments. Parents and program staff should jointly set program goals (Comer and Haynes, 1991). Olmstead (1991) recommends that it may be best to begin with only two or three objectives and to add more after the program is under way and running smoothly. Among these initial objectives there should be at least one related to the concerns of parents, that is, if the concerns are different.

Collaboration enables both staff and parents to develop a sense of ownership and pride in the school's efforts to enhance success for all learners. Olmstead (1991) suggests that the likelihood of success increases if both parents and staff participate in framing program goals.

Communications between home and school should occur frequently and on a regular basis. Research indicates that most teachers do not contact parents unless there is a problem. Communication between schools and parents with low socio-economic status is primarily negative, focused largely on academic and behaviourial problems (Cochran and Dean, 1991; Liontos, 1992). Schools need to develop communication strategies that best serve parents. Williams and Chauvkin (1989) indicate that effective parent involvement programs also communicate with other programs to share information resources and technical expertise. In addition, they help program staff identify additional resources for their own use.

Multiple Entry Points

Parent involvement programs should include several types of involvement activities or multiple entry points that are appreciative of a parent's level of skill, need, time, and energy (Helleen, 1988). Liontos (1991) suggests that multiple entry points are particularly significant for high risk families. In her work, Olmstead (1991) found that parents were more likely to become involved if they could choose an activity from among several alternatives. She suggests that activities should include at least two of the following types

- parental involvement in the school or classroom
- group meetings of parents or of parents and staff
- one-to-one parent-school personnel meetings at home or at school
- parent-child activities, either at home or school
- parents using community resources or agencies (library, adult education)

Program Maintenance

Administrators and educators may use a variety of means to increase attendance at parent meetings and maintain interest in programs. Some suggestions include: scheduling meetings at times that are convenient for parents or holding two meetings at different times. Other recommendations include holding meetings, especially initial meetings, outside of schools, in settings less intimidating and more accessible to parents, and providing transportation. Furthermore, it is crucial that every meeting or event has to respond to some need or concern of parents (Olmstead, 1991). Liontos (1992) adds that if schools really want to make parents feel welcome and comfortable, they should set up a room in the school that parents can call their own.

Comer and Haynes (1991) suggest that schools should match parents and teachers carefully on key personality and interest variables whenever possible and develop protocol for changes when a match does not work out. They also suggest that administrators and educators take all the necessary steps to protect the confidentiality of student, teacher, and parent information.

Finally, schools need to establish procedures for ongoing evaluation of parental involvement, including a mechanism for providing feedback to parents (Comer and Haynes, 1991). Effective programs have regular evaluation activities at key stages as well as at the conclusion of a cycle or phase (Davis, 1989; Williams and Chauvkin, 1989). Evaluations enable parents and staff to make program revisions on a continuous basis to ensure that activities strengthen collaboration.

Conclusion

Parental involvement in the educational process is of primary importance in the optimal cognitive, social, and emotional development of children and essential for effective schooling. Involving parents in meaningful ways provides students, parents, schools, and the community with a variety of significant benefits including improved academic performance, improved student behaviour, enhanced parental self-worth and self-confidence, and improved working environments for educators.

When schools build programs on the needs and strengths of parents and let them know that their strengths are valued, the social distance between schools and families decreases.

Parent involvement, however, is one of the most challenging practices to implement and sustain successfully. Programs develop gradually. Administrators and educators need to build trust among parents. Administrative commitment, support, resources, and training are also needed to ensure positive outcomes. Furthermore, schools need to accommodate parents' work obligations, lifestyles, cultural backgrounds, values, interests, needs, and strengths when planning their programs. When schools build programs on the needs and strengths of parents and let them know that their strengths are valued, the social distance between schools and families decreases. Furtherfore, the reputation of the school as a caring and enabling place spreads throughout the community and generates greater collaboration, cooperation, and involvement.

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